



January 27, 2010

\$75M eyed for Blue Ridge Parkway expansion

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Members of the North Carolina and Virginia congressional delegations offered their contribution Tuesday to the 75th anniversary celebration of the Blue Ridge Parkway: proposed legislation to add up to 50,000 acres to the 469-mile long, two-state parkway.

Companion versions of the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act introduced in the House and the Senate would authorize \$75 million over five years to buy land adjacent to parkway property.

"The Blue Ridge Parkway offers some of the most spectacular mountain views in the nation, and this legislation will preserve those views for our children and grandchildren," said Rep. Heath Shuler, D-Waynesville, one of the sponsors.

He said the parkway also has become an important source of revenue. The parkway generates an estimated \$2.3 billion annually in North Carolina and Virginia.

Other sponsors include North Carolina's Democratic Sen. Kay Hagan and Republican Sen. Richard Burr, as well as Virginia Democratic Sens. Jim Webb and Mark Warner. Rep. David Price, D-Chapel Hill, is among the House sponsors.

The legislation does not designate which parcels would be acquired with the money. It does require that they be contiguous to parkway property and the acquisitions be voluntary and not taken through eminent domain.

The additional parkway land that would be purchased is the equivalent of 78 square miles.

Reid Wilson, executive director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, praised the efforts of the North Carolina delegation for supporting a "wise investment in the long-term health of the parkway and the tourism economies of communities near this national treasure."

Even if the legislation were approved, the Congress would still have to act separately to appropriate the money to buy the land. Price's sponsorship of the legislation is particularly significant, Wilson said, because he is a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee.

Construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway began in 1935 near Cumberland Knob, N.C., and was completed in 1987. It annually brings 20 million visitors

Parkway managers and supporters said that private development has been eating away at the long-range scenic views that are the parkway's main attraction. They say their ability to do anything about the erosion of the so-called "view shed" is limited. The next step is for the bills to be considered by congressional committees — the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and the House Natural Resources Committee.